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"The art of governing well has to be learned."—Walter Lippmann

Pluralism, Multiculturalism and Group Rights

by Chandran Kukathas

However prevalent may have been the longing for homogeneity, or at least social unity, in political thinking, the fundamental point which must be recognized is that cultural diversity or pluralism has been the most notable feature of society in the history of human settlement. "Marginality and pluralism were and are the norm of civilized existence."[1] There are several reasons why this is the pattern revealed by history.[2] The first has to do with the ubiquity of military conflict. Even among barbarians ethnic political unity was fragile because military conquests resulted in the mixing of peoples. But throughout history the military ventures of both nomadic and civilized peoples ensured a continual mingling of alien peoples. A second factor which contributed to this mingling was trade, which developed further with greater specialization and the division of labor.[3] Thirdly, disease, in its impact on health and mortality in urban centers had a profound demographic effect: the loss of populations and labor shortages meant that cities were forced to look outside for replacement—to immigrants, to guest workers, and to slaves. Finally, the rise of universalist religions such as Islam, Buddhism and Christianity served to further transform distant cultures with foreign ideas and foreign visitors.

The consequence of all this for modern societies is that while many nations may have their origins in some particular ethnic heritage, scarcely a handful are in any sense ethnically homogeneous.[4] Equally few are culturally homogeneous inasmuch as most societies sustain a variety of religions, languages, and forms of customary life. Matters are further complicated by the fact that ethnic and cultural identities are not readily identifiable by looking to ascriptive characteristics. Identity is, to a considerable extent a matter of choice. In a liberal democracy like the United States, for example, as Mary Waters has shown in *Ethnic Options,*[5] ethnic intermarriage among the white population has not eliminated ethnic allegiances but has rather expanded the range of ethnicities people may choose to adopt. Many people of mixed ancestry have no option but to choose which ethnicity to adopt since there is no 'natural' course to take. And in many cases people take options which serve their interests.[6]

The fundamental point is that ethnicity and culture are not static but constantly changing in response to economic, social and political conditions. In looking at culturally pluralistic societies—that is to say, most societies—what we find are neither melting pots nor mosaics but ever-shifting kaleidoscopic patterns. In absolute terms, there are few if any stable cultural formations, since nearly all are affected not only by immigration and intermarriage but also by the trade in cultural products and information, and by the expansion of the world's largest industry: tourism.

If all this is the case, the idea of societies trying to preserve some sort of cultural homogeneity looks implausible. Human history and the nature of modern societies suggest that pluralism is the norm and that homogeneity is simply not feasible.

Even if homogeneity were feasible, however, this would not be to say that it is desirable. At least two kinds of arguments might be mounted against the pursuit of homogeneity, the first invoking the value of liberty and the second appealing to the importance of culture. The argument from liberty is that a measure of cultural homogeneity could only be bought at the cost of establishing a powerful (governmental) apparatus to enforce it (by compelling assimilation or ensuring the exclusion of outsiders). Individual liberty would be

continued on page 4

Inside:

Will Kymlicka, Russell Hardin, James Tully on Group Rights

Symposium: Philippe Van Parijs' *Real Freedom for All*

continued from page 1

curtailed insofar as some options would be closed off to people, and to the extent that individuals are compelled to adopt particular ways or practices.[7] The argument from the importance of culture is that the pursuit of homogeneity will almost invariably be at the expense of minorities who wish to preserve their culture. In some of these cases at least the destruction or the wearing down of the minority culture may be extremely harmful to individuals unwilling or unable to assimilate into the wider society.[8]

Moreover, in the light of historical experience, the arguments in favor of homogeneity do not seem especially compelling. The argument that cultural pluralism will lead to instability and violent conflict between cultures and ethnic communities appears to have some merit when one notes the numerous instances of such conflict. Yet on the other hand, the attempt to reorganize the world along national criteria has also led to violent conflict rather than the reign of peace, often at the expense of the most innocent and vulnerable.[9] In part the emergence of such conflict simply reflects the heterogeneity of apparently homogeneous groups. For example, in the former Indian state of Madras, cleavages within the Telugu-speaking population were not very important. Yet as soon as a Telugu-speaking state was carved out of Madras, Telugu subgroups quickly emerged as political entities.[10] Moves toward an imagined homogeneity do not mean a move away from conflict.

The question of whether a society should be culturally pluralistic or multicultural is not really an issue: modern societies, for the most part, simply are multicultural. The important question is, what kinds of institutions should govern a multicultural society.

The argument that ethnic or cultural minorities are a danger to the state also seems unpersuasive, despite the claims of the states in question. As Maybury-Lewis observes, it is hard to see how the Miskito Indians of Nicaragua, or the Indians who form one percent of the Brazilian population really pose a threat to the state.[11] There is little doubt, however, that the state has posed a considerable threat to such minorities.

Even the argument advanced, for example, by John Arthur Roebuck in his advocacy of assimilation for French-Canadians, that cultural pluralism would lead to the erosion of rights and freedoms, is not in the end quite convincing. Provided cultural membership is not coerced, individuals often prefer to exercise the freedom of association upon which cultural pluralism rests. And there is no reason why those who are members of minority cultures should necessarily enjoy fewer rights or freedoms—although in some cases they may. (What is more likely is that, as members of a cultural minority they will enjoy less political power. However, there are serious dangers in attempting to deal with this inequality by granting special political rights to such minorities.)[12]

The argument against cultural pluralism which has to be taken most seriously, however, is the argument put by Rousseau and those whom he inspired. This is the argument that a certain measure of homogeneity is necessary for the preservation of a political community. To answer this challenge, however, we need to look more generally at the arguments for cultural pluralism and to draw out the implications for the nature of a multicultural society. The question of whether a society should be culturally pluralistic or multicultural is not really an issue: modern societies, for the most part, simply are multicultural. The important question is, what kinds of institutions should govern a multicultural society.

The answer to this question, I suggest, will depend upon the answer to the question of what kinds of institutions should govern pluralist societies generally. Multiculturalism or cultural pluralism is, in the end, one kind of pluralism. So we should begin by asking what exactly is pluralism. There are many respects in which a society might be pluralistic.[13] First, it might exhibit the cultural pluralism of the kind discussed here. Second, it might exhibit a demographic pluralism inasmuch as human activities are importantly shaped by such factors as age, gender, social role (eldest son, spouse) or geographical (urban or rural) location. Third, in most societies there is usually a pluralism of interests insofar as there are differences of ends (and the powers to pursue them) among a variety of occupations or professions (farmers and soldiers), or classes (the poor), or institutions (churches and armies). Fourth, a society may be characterized by political pluralism if there are opportunities for groups which share distinct moral views about what would be good for the polity to influence the shape of that polity. Fifth, there might be an element of psychological pluralism in a society if individuals are sufficiently diverse in nature that they possess different temperaments, skills and traits. Sixth, there might be intellectual or scientific pluralism if the society harbors a variety of explanatory systems. Finally, a society might be pluralistic because within it there are distinct and competing moral values or principles.

What kinds of institutions are appropriate if societies are pluralistic in some or all of these ways? If we assume that the pursuit of homogeneity is out of the question for reasons discussed earlier, then there are two main alternative paths that might be taken. The first alternative looks to give explicit political recognition to the different pluralist elements within society, regarding them all as deserving of representation or the opportunity to participate in the processes of governance. The second alternative does not explicitly recognize these elements as legitimate participants in the political process but rather views individuals, with particular rights and freedoms, as the primary actors in the public realm.

I wish to argue for the second approach, placing much less emphasis on bringing the plurality of interests in society into the public domain as political actors. The implication of this view for multiculturalism is the rejection of interest-group pluralism of the sort advocated, for example, by D.L Jayasuriya.[14]

Let me begin by considering some of the reasons why the first alternative might be attractive, before turning to offer arguments for rejecting it. The first reason why the explicit recognition of pluralist elements looks attractive is that it seems to emphasize inclusiveness—other interests or values or approaches are not excluded but brought into public discourse.

Secondly, and relatedly, this approach emphasizes the value of participation by the different elements of society in the shaping of that society. This is especially important to those who see great value in collective self-government. Third, this approach seems to give greater weight to minority interests, and especially their interest in self-determination. Fourth, it has been argued that institutions which allow minority groups "to participate fully and exercise their rights in the broad public domain would facilitate social integration and encourag[e] a 'civic religion'"; indeed it would "facilitate the processes of nation building through a shared sense of a common destiny."[15]

Political institutions should, as far as possible, serve to allow these different elements to flourish but should not be in the business of enabling these elements or interests to shape society.

Finally, it has been argued that, while the polity 'requires' both psychological and moral pluralism, it cannot be simply left to chance for these to reproduce themselves. Thus Amelie Rorty avers that some kind of intervention is needed through a "sound system of education" to ensure some kind of balance or 'equilibrium' of pluralist elements. It cannot be left to the institutions of the private sphere (such as the family) to ensure the preservation of such values, so we need "central educative and formative" institutions combined with mechanisms to "coordinate benefits to each group in a system of dynamic equilibrium."[16]

The view I wish to develop in contrast to the group-participation approach is a view which resists according a specific place or role for the pluralist elements of society. Political institutions should, as far as possible, serve to allow these different elements to flourish but should not be in the business of enabling these elements or interests to shape society. This is not to say that political institutions should suppress particular interests, nor is it to deny that the nature of society will inevitably be shaped in some way by the interests and values of its various components. It is simply to maintain that the role of political institutions should be neutral, as far as possible, as to how this happens.

And I would suggest that the best prospect for this happening is for institutions to be designed, not to deal with the plurality of interests and values in society as they are manifested in particular groups or representatives, but rather to uphold particular individual rights and freedoms regardless of the particular interests or affiliations of the individuals.

To make this position a little clearer it might help to draw an analogy between my view and the view advanced by J.N. Figgis in respect of religious pluralism. Figgis maintained that if one accepted religious and political pluralism, then the best kind of state had to be a secular state—a tolerant secular state which allowed religious groups to exist and order their own affairs without interference. But at the same time, these groups could not try to force upon the society religious values or practices which had their origins in their own particular religious convictions. He wrote:

> We cannot claim liberty for ourselves, while at the same time proposing to deny it to others. If we are to cry 'hands off' to the civil power in regard to such matters as marriage, doctrine, ritual, or the conditions of communion inside the Church—and it is the necessary condition of a free religious society that it should regulate these matters—then we must give up attempting to dictate the policy of the State in regard to the whole mass of its citizens.[17]

For Figgis, "when judging political questions we should do so as citizens, and not as churchmen."[18] In this regard, he made a very clear distinction between the public and the private domains of social life. The point I want to make about pluralism more generally (and about cultural pluralism in particular) is very much Figgis' point. People from particular religious or cultural or intellectual or moral backgrounds should have every right and the freedom to speak or to play a role in public affairs. But they enjoy these rights and freedoms as individual citizens, rather than as members or representatives of particular groups.

Of course, they would also have the right to become involved in matters which affect the interests of (one or more of) the group(s) to which they belong. In some cases (though not always!) their opinions may have to be accorded greater respect because they are dealing with matters with which they are more familiar. In other cases, individuals may be moved to act to change the rules of the social game because those rules treat particular kinds of persons unjustly, and—as the ones directly harmed—they are in the best position to know this. But in the end, these opinions must be seen as having been advanced by individuals, and political institutions should protect not the right of some interest to be advanced or to influence the shape of society but the right of individuals, separately or in concert with others, to defend their interests or their political views.

In considering the case of multiculturalism or cultural pluralism, then, the view I am advancing is that there is no call for any particular cultural community be given explicit recognition and to play a special role in public affairs; nor is there a call for all cultural communities to be granted explicit recognition. In short, there is no need for a policy on multiculturalism, any more than there is a need for a policy on religious pluralism.

> *People from particular religious or cultural or intellectual or moral backgrounds should have every right and the freedom to speak or to play a role in public affairs. But they enjoy these rights and freedoms as individual citizens, rather than as members or representatives of particular groups.*

Yet, granted that this is one way of viewing the matter, what reasons might be advanced for adopting this point of view? There are two main reasons I have to advance. The first is that, if our concern in a multicultural society is to preserve cultural pluralism, this is best done by institutions which protect individual rights and freedoms rather than interests. The reason for making this claim is that, as I argued earlier, culture (and ethnicity) are not static but constantly changing in response to economic, social and political conditions. If cultural formations are unstable in this way, then to try to entrench them is to try to stifle pluralism by preserving the existing structure (or perhaps some preferred structure) of interest and power. It presumes that members of particular groups will always see their interests in terms of the interests of those groups, or suggests that individuals may not (that is, should not be allowed to) reconstitute into quite different kinds of groups. In the end, this approach provides the greatest advantage to the dominant elites or majorities within such groups.[19]

The second reason for adopting this point of view which emphasizes that, while we may regard ourselves as members of some particular culture in private, we should see ourselves as, and have only the rights of, citizens in public, is that putting ethnicity and culture into the public realm is not in the interests of particular cultural communities. Once the distinction between the public and the private realm is broken down it will become more difficult for some cultural minorities to preserve what is distinctive and perhaps valued in their societies. If certain cultural values or issues are not kept in the private realm but raised as matters of public concern, then it is always that some cultural minorities will lose the argument in the public forum, with the effect of forcing them to modify their own practices rather than changing those of the wider society. As Figgis suggested, those who want the civil power to keep its hands off such matters as marriage and other doctrines within their religions are best served by seeking to keep these matters within the private realm rather than seeking to shape a position for all society on these matters.

In the end, I would suggest that in trying to preserve pluralism we are best served by trying to preserve norms of tolerance and respect for individual freedoms rather than by attempts to shape society in accordance with the interests of existing groups.[20] And I would conclude that this, perhaps, gives us the answer to the worry raised by Rousseau: that a certain measure of homogeneity may be necessary to sustain a political community. A society on my view would be sufficiently homogeneous if it were able to sustain a commitment to preserve norms of individual freedom and tolerance. If society needs a 'civil religion' reducible to a few dogmas, as Rousseau suggested, these commitments would be dogma enough.

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Endnotes

1. William H. McNeill, *Polyethnicity and National Unity in World History.* The Donald G. Creighton Lectures, 1985, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986) p. 23,

2. In this paragraph I have drawn largely on McNeil, *Polyethnicity and National Unity,* ch. 1.

3. On this see F.A.Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit. The Errors of Socialism,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1988), ch.3.

4. See Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations,* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987.)

5. Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.)

6. An important work defending this proposition is Orlando Patterson, "Context and Choice in Ethnic Allegiance: A Theoretical Framework and Caribbean Case Study," in Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan (eds.), *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience,* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 305–349. In examining the development of two similar groups of Chinese arriving in Guyana and Jamaica Patterson found that in Jamaica, given the economic conditions, the best interests of the group were served by exclusive specialization in the retail trade, and that success in this regard allowed for and reinforced a choice of ethnic consolidation based on cultural distinctiveness. In Guyana, however, economic and social conditions encouraged the Chinese to pursue a wide range of occupations, and so synthetic creolization and abandonment of

Chinese culture were the most rational courses of action. (See p. 347.)

7. For example, Turks resident in Bulgaria under communist rule were forced to adopt Bulgarian names.

8. On this see Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), esp. ch. 8. See also the arguments of Saunders Lewis, founder of the Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, who maintained that Welsh culture was destroyed by nationalism. These views are discussed by Anthony H. Birch in *Nationalism and National Integration,* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 33–4.

9. This point is well made by Elie Kedourie in his 'Introduction' to the edited volume, *Nationalism in Asia and Africa,* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971), pp. 1–152, and especially at pp. 135–6.

10. See Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 66–7.

11. See David Maybury Lewis, "Conclusion: Living in Leviathan: Ethnic Groups and the State," in David Maybury Lewis (ed.), *The Prospects for Plural Societies.* 1982 Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society, American Ethnological Society, Washington, 1984, pp. 220–231 at p. 223.

12. I discuss this issue at greater length in *The Fraternal Conceit. Liberal versus Collectivist Ideas of Community* (Sydney: Centre for Independent Studies, 1991).

13. In the analysis which follows I am indebted to Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, "Varieties of Pluralism in a Polyphonic Society", *Review of Metaphysics,* XLV: 1, 1991, pp. 3–20.

14. Jayasuriya, "State, Nation and Diversity in Australia," *Current Affairs Bulletin,* November 1991, pp. 21–26.

15. Ibid., p. 26.

16. Rorty, "Varieties of pluralism," pp. 16–17.

17. Churches in the Modern State, quoted in David Nicholls, *The Pluralist State,* (London: Macmillan, 1975) p. 104.

18. Nicholls, *The Pluralist State,* p. 104.

19. I have argued this in greater detail in "Are there any cultural rights?," *Political Theory,* vol. 20, no.1, 1992, pp. 105–139.

20. I have argued for the centrality of the theory of toleration in the liberal approach to the treatment of minorities in "Cultural Toleration," in W. Kymlicka and I. Shapiro (eds.), Ethnicity and Group Rights, *NOMOS,* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) (forthcoming).

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October 14-15, 1996

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The Institute for American Values, in collaboration with the Center of the American Experiment and the National Fatherhood Initiative, is co-sponsoring a conference on "The Fatherhood Movement: A Call to Action," on October 14-15, 1996 in Minneapolis. Hosted by the Center of the American Experiment, this conference will bring together 25 of the nation's leading experts on fatherhood to consider public policy and cultural initiatives which address the growing problem of children who lack the presence and active involvement of a father in their lives.

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